

“The Final Days of Daniel Knopoff” by Pablo Besarón

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To Ariel Korob (Z”L)

The morning of Thursday, February 7, 2007, was a typical summer morning. With suffocating heat settling in for the rest of the day, it was inadvisable to walk or take the subway.

Daniel backed out of the garage on his way to temple. The last week in Buenos Aires; on Sunday, he would take Katia and their three children to Mendoza. A stream with a magnificent canyon in the background, a good way to relax for two weeks after a year-long stretch of demanding work.



“Clouds and Fields” by Lisa McShane, courtesy of the artist.

He backed out of the garage and up the driveway ramp. He looked in the driver’s side mirror. No one in sight. In reverse out onto the street. A young man on a bike grazed the driver’s side mirror. Daniel did not move forward but the guy threw himself on the hood, the bicycle caught up in his legs. He looked like a bad actor rehearsing a scene that called for a simulated accident. Asked the question, the script would read: Yeah, it hurts like a son of a bitch.

Their conversation was brief and muddled. It seemed he was fine, that the acting intended to introduce a gradual and hidden brutality.

Daniel thought of calling a doctor or the police. He wanted to call a doctor, but the guy suggested reporting the accident to the police.

At the station, a tall, short-haired officer behind the counter asked them why they were there. Motor vehicle accident involving a cyclist. The officer looked at a policewoman behind him and at the deputy commissioner, a bit farther back. He went over to the deputy commissioner and explained the situation.

A poorly concealed smirk that read *Here's a sucker for the taking* appeared on the deputy commissioner's face. He approached and asked Daniel if he had brought the car along and the cyclist if he had seen a doctor. The deputy commissioner's tone was emphatic; he was talking about a serious matter. The vehicle, he said, will be impounded for inspection. You'll need to make a statement. The victim is to be taken to Fernández Hospital.

This was an unknown world to Daniel. He had only been in a police station once before, and very briefly, to report the loss of his wallet and cellphone. The procedure seemed reasonable.

While the policewoman took his statement, he saw a man in a suit sitting in the waiting area, observing attentively. It seemed he had been there all along, but Daniel only noticed him then. And now? What happens next? Daniel asked of the policewoman. You'll have to wait for the medical report, see if the kid presses charges, and wait 48 to 72 hours for the car to be inspected; you should file a report with your insurance company. She advised him to call a lawyer.

If they hold the car for 72 hours, thought Daniel, I won't get it back until the day before we leave for Mendoza. He knew many lawyers. Some were donors, generally second and third generation attorneys, mixed in with public notaries and accountants. He thought of calling Katia, telling her everything and having her find a lawyer, but then he remembered Fabian, who was fresh out of law school and sometimes came to temple on the Sabbath. Fabian had told him of a similar case: he had accidentally run into an empanada delivery motorcycle. Besides, he was coming out of a deep depression. It was a good idea to give him a call.

He signed the police report and was free to go, but before leaving, he called Fabian. Did you make a statement? Did you sign it? Yes. I'm on my way.

The officer who had first spoken to Daniel asked him to stop by the commissioner's office. The door was ajar. Come in, Knopoff.

He was surprised to be called by his surname and recalled how Katia reproached him for forgetting other people's names. Calling someone by name is to recognize that person, to distinguish the individual. We all need to be recognized.

The commissioner's face was as he imagined a commissioner's face would be: hard lines, strong and protruding teeth, mussed up hair and perforated skin, scars sketching a map that read *shit happened here*. The commissioner looked serious. Come in, Knopoff ... yours is a complicated case ... I'm not saying that to scare you ... but you know ... a young man of limited means ... lawyers fishing for a quick settlement ... a traffic accident report signed by the driver ... who knows what the vehicle inspection will turn up ...

He was amazed by the commissioner's sincerity. It was as if, by happy fortune, he had a friend on the other side of the counter. Everything was taking on a scripted appearance, and he was just now beginning to discern it.

The commissioner spoke with emphatic discomfiture, like the deputy commissioner had, as if both received the same instructions from the director of a staged scene. Daniel wasn't worried about himself, but rather about how concerned the commissioner was.

The commissioner offered him a drink. Coffee? ... Tea? ... A bit of whiskey? Daniel figured that if he accepted *a bit of whiskey*, he'd have the commissioner on his side. But it wasn't advisable to go through life being a sycophant; he opted for tea. Fabian arrived. He was notified by a knock on the door. The commissioner saw Daniel off with a firm handshake and accompanied him part of the way out.

As soon as he saw Daniel, Fabian said: They're impounding your car and we'll have to wait for the doctors to examine the kid and file their medical report; we can go. Everything seemed to be on the track of bureaucratic logic, a matter of paperwork and signatures. Daniel cordially said his good-byes to those at the precinct and sent his regards to the commissioner. They telephoned his insurance company to report the accident.

Fabian instructed Daniel to notify him should the police called him in to testify ... When they tell you the car is ready for pick up, I'll go with you ... any news, you call me ...

The rest of the day transpired with anxiety but without incident (meek and uneasy); it wouldn't do any good to get upset. After all, in less than four days, vacation.

Early the next day, the doorbell rang at the Knopoff household. It was the man in the suit from the police station, the same one he noticed in the background the day before. The young man from the accident waited by the sidewalk.

The man greeted Knopoff and introduced himself as the *victim's* lawyer. The medical expert reported that my client suffered injuries ... physical traumas that will keep him out of work for a few weeks ... my client is considering whether he'll mention these results in his statement to the police ... but if we can come to an arrangement, you know, clean slate ...

Knopoff, without inviting the lawyer in, asked him to wait a few seconds. He closed the door and called Fabian, but no one answered. Daniel opened the door again and asked the lawyer what they were asking for. Ten thousand pesos, and it'll be like this never happened.

He didn't have that kind of cash, but he also didn't see the matter as negotiable. Besides, it was perhaps a way to help somebody who needed the money. After all, currency was meant to circulate; who knew where it would end up. They agreed to meet at the house in an hour; that would be enough time for him to make the necessary withdrawals, part from their vacation savings and part from a bank account in the red.

At the established hour, the lawyer rang the doorbell again. Daniel had managed to pull together five thousand four hundred pesos. The lawyer took the money, wished him a good day and left.

In the days that followed, Daniel cancelled a dinner with donors and two meetings with couples who were about to get married. It was time, he told himself, to shut things down and leave on vacation without a worry in the world (meek and at ease).

The day before he was to depart for Mendoza, Fabian called. Daniel told him how things had ended. Fabian was concerned that they hadn't had the chance to speak beforehand, but he didn't express any misgivings. They agreed to arrange to go and pick up the car together later.

But Daniel did not wish to bother Fabian. The episode had definitely concluded. Retrieving the car would be a simple matter.

When he entered the police station around two in the afternoon, the officer from the previous day greeted him naturally. The policewoman who had taken his statement did not address him, but gave him a look that tried to transmit something.

He had to sign some papers acknowledging receipt of the vehicle in the same condition he had left it. The deputy commissioner shook his hand; the commissioner handed him the keys and indicated where the car was parked.

This little nightmare is coming to an end, thought Daniel with a sigh as we walked to the car. Put it in gear and take her home to the garage.

The day went by and night fell, but he remained anxious. Collateral effects, he thought, like when they pull a splinter from the sole of your foot ... good-bye splinter, but the pain persists a while longer until it subsides and things return to normal.

With Katia, he communicated only what was necessary. She noticed he was nervous, but they were about to go on vacation and she didn't wish to upset him.

In a few hours, bright and early, with the first rays of sunlight, the family would depart for Mendoza.

In the morning, Daniel Knopoff loaded the car with their things. He wanted to leave right away. Spatial distance would create emotional distance.

Daniel, Katia and their three children climbed into the car while it was still in the garage, and when he put it in reverse, he was afraid the cyclist would reappear. He tried to laugh at himself for having thought such a thing.

For the first time, it crossed his mind that he hadn't had the car for the past few days. When Katia posed the question, he had responded that he took it to a mechanic after having retrieved it from the police. He didn't want to worry her or let her know that he didn't think it necessary (honestly, the idea hadn't even occurred to him).

From that moment on, the chain of events that followed was irreversible and fatal. What happened was reported by the press:

"Rabbi Daniel Knopoff of the Grand Temple on Laval Street in the neighborhood of Once died in an automobile accident on a highway in northern La Pampa. The man of faith was at the wheel and lost control of the vehicle, possibly due to a blown tire. The car collided with an oncoming truck.

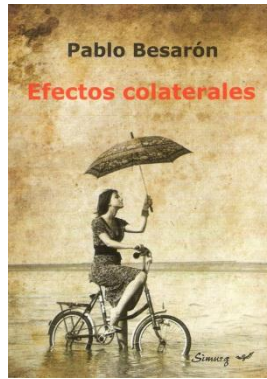
"Knopoff, 37, was driving with his wife and three children, all of whom were seriously injured and spent the night in the ICU at General Pico Hospital. Medical sources indicate that the condition of all four is improving. The truck driver was unharmed." (*Clarín* newspaper, Tuesday, February 12).

Accounts varied: he nicked the shoulder, he was speeding, he got a flat.

At the police station, the officer who had first handled Knopoff's case saw the news on *Crónica* TV.

"Hey, Deputy Commissioner, you have to see this. Check out who died on the highway," he said.

The Deputy Commissioner had already heard the news. He regretted that they had taken advantage of that *sucker*. He appeared to have been a good, upstanding fellow. We have to get rid of the guys who swap out the tires, thought the Deputy Commissioner, and replace the parts, and even the hood ornaments on the cars in the impound lot. What assholes. They take such stupid risks for nothing. They'll end up fucking things up for all of us.



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Pablo Besarón is a writer and essayist from the City of Buenos Aires. His literary essays have appeared in a variety of publications, and in 2009 Ediciones Simurg published [La Conspiración](#), a collection of his essays on Argentine literature. Efectos Colaterales is his first work of published fiction. Presently, he is working on his second short story collection and a documentary on Jewish Argentine cinematographers.

In an interview with Radio del Buen Aire, Pablo Besarón discussed his writing in Efectos Colaterales:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wDpN9ZKIOk>